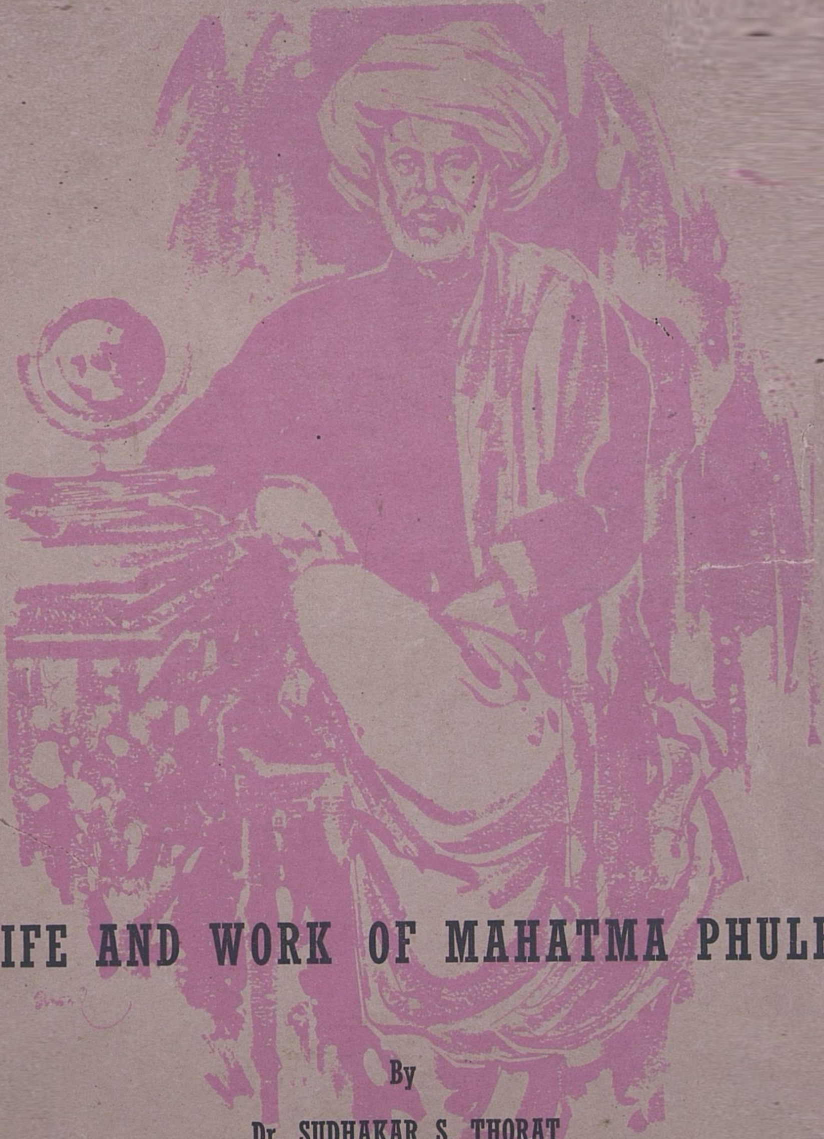

LIFE AND WORK OF MAHATMA PHULE

By

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Life and Work of Mahatma Phule

During the time Mahatma Phule started his life's work, the British regime in India was at the zenith of its power. Indians especially in urban areas were under the sway of British education, administration and political philosophy originating from Britain. Those were the days of turmoil in which there was a conflict between those who believed in the superiority of the British and those who believed that the Indian traditions were supreme.

At such a juncture, there was a conflict between the rationalists and the orthodox. One of the eminent social reformers of this period was Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a star who rose on the firmament and who still continues to guide the thinking people of Maharashtra. During the life time of Phule, social injustice, inequality, casteism, exploitation of the farmers and the under-privileged strata of society, untouchability and the suppression of women were rampant. It is with these social problems that Mahatma Phule battled with the every ounce of energy he had.

Mahatma Phule was born in Poona in the year 1827. As if the parents had seen the portents of the future, they named the child Jyoti which means a flame. When Jyotiba was about a year old his mother died. In order to look after the children properly his father did not remarry as he was not sure of the treatment the children would receive from a new wife.

At the age of seven, Jyotiba started attending a Marathi school in Poona. His father had to choose a missionary school as Jyotiba was denied admission in the private schools which were run by high caste Hindus. Jyotiba came of a family which was considered lowly during that period. However, friends of Jyoti's father discouraged him from sending the child to school telling him that it was likely that the child may be converted to Christianity. Fearing this, Jyoti's father discontinued his education and put him to work as a helper in his own gardening work. In the meanwhile, Jyoti's father was influenced by some other learned people who removed the fear of conversion from his mind. After having lost three years of schooling, Jyoti was again, enrolled in the School.

In his young age, Jyotiba not only studied hard but also built a strong physique and learned such things as swordsmanship. A teacher Shri. Lahuji Buwa Mang who privately taught swordsmanship and war games was an ardent believer in revolution to throw away the British rule. Jyoti came under his influence during this time. The love of the motherland was nurtured in Jyoti's heart. One of the books which influenced him at this time was Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man.'

At the age of seventeen, Jyoti was involved in a squabble with some British soldiers in which there was a physical fight. Jyoti overpowered the soldiers who had to run away. Further influence on Jyoti came from the works on Shivaji, Napoleon and George Washington. Jyoti was impressed by the freedom struggle in U. S. A. and started thinking of driving away the British from India. At the age of twenty one Jyoti passed his matriculation examination. He also studied the life of Christ, Buddha, Basaweshwar, Jain tirthankaras and such classics as Vedas, Upanishadas and Geeta even though people from the so-called lower castes were not permitted to read Vedas. He also studied the works of the great saints of Maharashtra such as Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram. During this time, Jyotiba also studied the trends in politics.

All this resulted into the development of a great understanding and awareness in his mind regarding social problems in general and problems of the down-trodden in particular in Maharashtra and the country. This led to the conviction in his mind that truth and love towards fellowmen are the true hallmarks of religion. He developed his thoughts that all men are born equal and that all are God's children. He believed that the socio-economic order should be such that every one should have equal opportunity, fair-play and justice.

Soon after passing the matriculation examination, Jyotiba was invited by a friend from a high caste to attend a wedding. The wedding was a gathering of high caste Hindus. When they found that Jyotiba, a person from a so-called low caste was attending the wedding they insulted him by forcing him to leave the wedding place. This humiliation disturbed Jyotiba very much. He felt deeply hurt. He started pondering over the religion which denied the dignity to people of so-called low castes.

He then started studying the meaning of the various religions to increase his understanding of the religious thought. Some customs like avoiding the

touch of the untouchables and the fragmentation of the society into different castes, some having privileges and each having deep prejudices about the other prevailed at that time. Jyotiba was moved by the lot of Harijans and the repressive attitude towards women. Like the untouchables, women were denied the right to education and to remarry if one became a widow. In fact at that time, it was considered inauspicious to have seen the face of a widow in the early morning. The feeling prevailing in the society at that time was that caste system was ordained by religion and that it was true Dharma of a person to accept the hierarchical order of the society. Jyotiba, therefore decided to fight against all these superstitious beliefs and injustices.

To give a concrete shape to his rebellion, he started the first school for girls in Poona in the year 1848. At that time, Jyotiba was only 21 years old. This was the first school in the whole of India for women started by an Indian. The girls' school met with great resistance from the orthodox people in Poona. They raised a hue and cry against the school and against the idea of education for women. Inspite of that Jyotiba stood firm as a rock.

Gradually the school grew in strength. Jyotiba found it difficult to get a teacher to teach in the school. This was because persons interested in teaching in the school were threatened by vested interests who could not appreciate this idea. However, Jyotiba did not budge an inch. He sought the help of his wife Savitrabai. Unfortunately, Savitrabai was never exposed to any formal learning. Jyotiba, therefore, started educating her. Soon Savitrabai received adequate training at the hands of Jyotiba to become a teacher. She started teaching in the school. There was a great furore and Savitrabai was abused by the die hards. They even indulged in stone-throwing at her. Several times Savitrabai was hurt by stones and sustained injuries. Some people even flung mud and cow-dung on her. This would have deterred lesser mortals but Savitrabai and Jyotiba were made of sterner stuff. Their's was to do or die but never retreat. The die hards approached Jyotiba's father and threatened to ostracise the family. Govindrao, Jyotiba's father, was cowed down by the threats . He asked Jyotiba and his wife to leave the home. With a heavy heart, Jyotiba left his home and hearth and went to live with a couple of friends.

At that time, Jyotiba was finding it difficult to get money to run the school. Therefore, he decided to become a building contractor and raised the money for his activities. He started building houses, bridges and took up

such other construction work. With this money he started a school for labourers. Gradually, Jyotiba gathered a few dedicated souls around him and started taking help from them. Soon Jyotiba established few more schools in the city of Poona.

Jyotiba now wanted to do something for the so called untouchables. Therefore, he issued an appeal through the newspapers in the year 1872 which stated that " Those shudras or anyone who would observe morality in the name of God and who would be making honest living will be considered by me as my brethren and I shall break bread with them whatever may be their religion " in 1851, Jyotiba started the first school for the so-called untouchables in India. Again some people started harassing Jyotiba, saying that Jyotiba was an agent of Christian missionaries and that he was trying to bring in Christianity. However, Jyotiba had nothing to do with such things. He was born a Hindu and he wanted to reform the misguided and superstition ridden Hindus by continuing to be a Hindu.

But Jyotiba's opponents did not stop only at insulting him. They plotted to murder him. They hired some mercenaries to kill Jyotiba. According to the plot the *goondas* went to the house of Jyotiba one night to execute the dastardly idea. At that time, they had a talk with Jyotiba in which Jyotiba convinced them about the foolishness they were planning to commit and told them that they were wanting to kill person who was working for some ideals without caring for his own life. He convinced them that while men can be killed, their ideas can become stronger with time. At the last minute, there was a change in the hearts of the hierlings and they stated that they would now kill the people who had misguided them. However, Jyotiba never believed in violence. He disuaded them from doing so. These mercenaries became one of the first and most loyal disciples of Jyotiba.

One of them called Dhondiram, started learning the three R's in Jyotiba's night school. Although Dhondiram was from a so-called low caste, Jyotiba sent him to Benaras for higher education. Dhondiram finally blossomed out into a great Sanskrit Pandit and defeated the Shankaracharya of Shrungeri in a religious debate. The Shankaracharya awarded the title of Pànditrao to Dhondiram who belonged to the **ramoshi* caste. Panditrao later wrote a book

★ Ramoshis are people who have been traditionally village watchmen.

called 'Vedachar'. The second mercenary Rode became Jyotiba's body guard and started singing reformist poems and songs composed by Jyotiba.

Jyotiba's activities expanded fast and he established a net work of schools in Poona. The education department of the Government was very much pleased with Jyotiba's work. At the age of 25 Jyotiba was felicitated at the hands of the Governor of Bombay, a rare event in those days.

Jyotiba's attention now turned to the emancipation of women. He started advocating widow remarriage in a society in which the custom of child marriage and *sati* prevailed not too long ago. He questioned society by saying that women were required to be *satis* but did anyone hear of a man immolating himself as *sati* when his dear wife died. In 1860, Jyotiba arranged the first widow remarriage in which a widow was remarried. It was a custom at that time to shave the head of a widow and force her to put on odd coloured clothes, not wear bangles and *kumkum* so that she looked unattractive. Jyotiba stood up against these ghastly practices. He started a movement among barbers suggesting them not to accept such filthy business. In 1890, he called a meeting of the barbers which was attended by about 500 of them. In this meeting, a decision was taken to the effect that the barbers would solidly refuse to tonsure widowed women.

During his wanderings as a social worker, Phule used to come across orphans and infants born out of wedlock and abandoned on the streets or near the dust bins. Jyotiba used to be horrified to see such sights. Therefore, he started an orphange and a maternity home. A number of orphans lived in this orphange under his fatherly care. Savitrabai also helped Phule in this work. Jyotiba was himself childless. Therefore, he adopted an orphan who happened to be from some other caste, as his own child. This child grew up and later became a medical doctor.

At this time, Harijans were not permitted to take water from the wells which were exclusively meant for caste Hindus. Jyoti used to stand near such well's and supply the water to the Harijans. He was the first caste Hindu in Poona who threw open his own well to people of all castes and creeds.

Jyotiba also worked with the labourers and farmers. Land-lords, money lenders and the Government used to exploit the farmers. In the same fashion, the working class people were being exploited by the rich. Jyotiba

decided to create an awakening in the minds of the people. Therefore, he started writing fearlessly about the problems of these people. It has been earlier stated that Jyotiba used to take up construction works as a contractor to make a living. While working as a contractor he could see poverty and the sufferings of the working class people.

The illiterate labourers were being taken advantage of by the supervisors, clerks, contractors and government officials. They would make underpayment to them. In order to lift the labourers out of their socio-economic handicaps, Jyotiba started a night school for them.

The plight of the farmers did not go unnoticed in the eyes of Jyotiba. To study the problems of the farmers, Jyotiba travelled on foot through many villages and went from hut to hut. He held meetings of the farmers to create an awakening among them. He explained to them the ideas on how to improve agriculture and urged them to develop agriculture. Through his writings he brought to the notice of the general public the miserable conditions in which the farmers lived. He brought to light the exploitation of the farmers by revenue, police and irrigation authorities like talathi, kulkarni, malmlatdar anp collector.

In the year 1885, the money lenders and land lords near Junnar in Poona District were found to be harassing the farmers with usurious rates of interest. The farmers decided to boycott the farming operations in the fields owned by the land lords. For a year, the lands went uncultivated. The farmers filed a petition with about five thousand signatures and sent it to the Government. Even then the money lenders and the land lords did not relent. Jyotiba came to know of this. He went to Junnar and at the request of the farmers spearheaded the movement. He explained the misery of the farmers to the government. There was a discussion among all the groups concerned and the money lenders and land lords decided to reduce the rates of interest. The farmers again went to work. Jyotiba became a friend of the farmers.

In 1890, a convention of the Indian National Congress was held in Bombay. Jyotiba attended this convention in the attire of a farmer. In order to focus the attention of the delegates on the problems of the farmers, he erected a huge statue of a farmer near the main entrance of the convention. During the convention, he championed the cause of the farmers and labourers. As a result, the delegates were for the first time apprised of the problems of the farmers and working class people who formed the real backbone of the nation.

Gradually, the general public started appreciating the burning concern which Jyotirao had for the problems of the massess. They also felt grateful to find that Jyotirao had done so much for them. In 1888, a meeting was held in Bombay in which Jyotiba was felicitated. Spontaneously the gathering conferred the title of Mahatma on him. At that convention Jyotiba appealed to the people to follow the path of "Truth, euality and freedom."

Among the many movements started by Mahatma Phule were those for removing the practice of child marriages, starting of libraries, movements to obtain justice for labourers and farmers and compulsory primary education. He also fought for the release of Lokamanya Tilak on bail when he had been arrested for political reasons.

To propagate his thoughts Jyotirao founded an organization by the name Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth). Phule spent nearly seventeen years of his life in spreading the message of the Samaj.

Gradually, the branches of the Samaj spread in various parts of Maharashtra. People from various castes and socio-economic strata became members of the Samaj. To spread the message of the Samaj, Jyotirao travelled in various parts of the state and conducted meetings at a time when road transport was not possible through buses or automotive vehicles. Through newspapers he wrote about the philosophy of the movement. He also composed poems about the movement. His books about the Satya Shodhak movement written at this time contain messages for all times. Jyotirao told the people that there is only one God who fills the whole universe and who is in the nature of truth. All human beings are God's children. Every human being has a right to be a devotee of this God. In order to reach God no self-appointed, self-seeking and selfish intermediaries are necessary. The superiority or inferiority of a person does not depend upon the caste in which he is born. A person's superiority depends upon the stage of his development. There are no religious books which have been written by God. God does not take bodily form and ideas of rebirth and rituals are figments or people's imagination. He further used to say that "To behave truthfully is to behave morally. Only that is the true religion. There is no other religion but that of truth". He also said that "There is no foundation for a belief in caste system. Nature did not create a caste system. God did not create a caste system. It is a great sin to believe in the caste system".

While championing the cause of women Jyotirao said, "Man and woman are born equal. They have got equal rights. Women have got as much right to education as men have. Women have a right to their independent opinion as much as men. Men and women should work shoulder to shoulder and make the families happy". In other words he said that they are like two sides of a medal. Through his writings Jyotirao opened a front against idol worship, priestcraft, ideas regarding reincarnation, casteism, polygamy, addiction to narcotics and drugs, excessive expenditure in weddings and death ceremonies and the high-handedness of the arrogant bureaucracy.

This great Mahatma died in the year 1890 after kindling the flame of enlightenment in the hearts and minds of millions of his country men. It is fitting that the very first Agricultural University in Maharashtra be named after such a great soul. Although he never saw the inside of a College or a University, he was by his example and precept a one man walking University. May his spirit light the path of generations to come that will pass through the portals of the University so aptly named after him.

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